

No barriers to success

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Byline: Greg Toppo

NEW ORLEANS -- In a makeshift waiting room of the warehouse that serves as the headquarters for public schools, three young prospective teachers sit.

As superintendent, Paul Vallas could someday be their boss. As he passes through the room, he stops to shake hands. Then he tries to persuade them to teach someplace else.

He has more than enough teachers for the new school year, which began last week, he explains. Have they considered Baton Rouge?

"I know Baton Rouge doesn't have the French Quarter," he says. "That's OK. It's OK to be far from the French Quarter -- keep you out of trouble."

As Vallas begins his second and probably final year trying to rebuild the ailing public school system, he not only has more teachers than he needs. He has eye-popping funding, nearly unchecked administrative power and "a sea of goodwill" that stretches across the USA.

The biggest question isn't whether he'll be able to turn around the system, at least in the short term. It's whether there's anything standing in his way.

If Vallas succeeds, observers say, he'll show that with a clean slate, extra cash and a few big ideas, a hard-charging reformer can fix an ailing system and create a template for other districts. If he doesn't succeed, they worry, Americans' faith in urban public schools could burn out for good.

Three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city's schools, Vallas says there is "absolutely no institutional obstacle" to reform.

The renowned leader helped transform Philadelphia's and Chicago's public schools. He now runs a school district that educates about 24,000 students, which is less than half the district's pre-storm population. It is one-eighth the size of the Philadelphia district and one-18th the size of Chicago.

Then again, Vallas faces challenges few other leaders do. "Find me a district that has such deep poverty," he says. "Find me a district that has so many overaged children. Find me a district that has so many children not living with their parents."

His students, virtually all African American, are among the poorest of any big city -- in some schools, fully 100% qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The storm further ravaged kids' lives, splitting families and neighborhoods. Three years after Katrina, schools need as much as \$1.7 billion in repairs. Vallas knows that within a year or two, much of his extra funding -- as well as the nation's attention -- may dry up.

Unprecedented funding

On Aug. 29, 2005, Katrina leveled or damaged most of New Orleans' schools and scattered students and teachers across the country. By then, decades of poor performance had prompted state officials to sweep its worst schools into something called the Recovery School District, or RSD. Last year, they tapped Vallas, 55, to kick the effort into overdrive.

He now presides over 34 traditional schools and another 33 independently run but publicly financed charter schools -- a system about as large as the Olathe, Kan., district -- with a weakened teachers' union, no local school board or bureaucracy and unprecedented funding. State and federal aid provide about \$16,000 a pupil, nearly twice what most districts spend.

Charitable donations add to his bottom line. For instance, the non-profit Kaboom has built state-of-the-art playgrounds at 27 schools at no expense to the city. And state officials announced a \$685 million plan last week, paid for mostly by FEMA, to rebuild the city's school buildings within five years.

Aggressive recruitment efforts -- most of them privately or federally funded -- have brought in so many teachers that Vallas recently had 160 applicants for a dozen positions. Another group, New Leaders for New Schools, has paid for, recruited and trained 21 new principals at a cost of \$100,000 each -- it's picking up the tab and anticipates that, in two years, it will have supplied half of New Orleans' principals.

"The really good news is that there is tremendous civic and human energy around making dramatic improvements in schools," says Jon Schnur, the group's CEO. "The bad news ... is that it historically was potentially the lowest-achieving school system in America."

In response, Vallas has changed pretty much everything, all at once, with little opposition. He lengthened the school day and year, adding seven weeks of instruction, including two more hours of math and 1.5 hours of reading each day. He started a "credit recovery" program for students who fail core classes. He has remade RSD's high schools into career-themed academies and opened a school for "overaged underachievers."

He is standardizing the curriculum and brought in Read180, a computerized program for older, struggling readers. He installed Internet-linked whiteboards in fourth- through 12th-grade classrooms and last year began handing out laptop computers to every high-school student.

He hired Eddie Compass, former police chief of New Orleans, to train security guards as counselors who visit disruptive kids' homes.

And he has overseen major repairs on nearly every building. Vallas has broken ground on two new schools, with the third (of a planned five) taking place Friday, the third anniversary of Katrina.

The same mistakes again?

Through it all, Vallas concedes that the effort is "mine to mess up, mine to lose."

"If we're not successful," he says, "you can put the blame squarely on my shoulders."

But a few critics worry that Vallas isn't going far enough. Relying on a standardized curriculum, new teacher recruitment and more technology, for instance, haven't produced sustainable gains in other big cities.

"He's just making a more sophisticated, more interesting version of the same mistake that traditional superintendents have made," says Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. "They figure that they know how to make this stuff work, they're just going to put these pieces together, and if everybody'll get out of their way, they can solve it, fix it."

Though it's a good start, Hess says, Vallas should expand training and support for teachers and principals to ensure "a talent pipeline that can be sustained when New Orleans is no longer the flavor of the month."

And though a standardized curriculum makes sense in a city where students move a lot, Hess says Vallas should broaden his thinking to allow other proven teaching models.

"The real opportunity of New Orleans is that with all this energy and mojo and enthusiasm and talent, it's actually an opportunity for a superintendent to focus much more on creating an environment where you allow new schools to bring in talent, and to launch schools rather than necessarily presume they're going to be part of the system," he says.

Whatever happens, it's clear Vallas won't stick around too long -- he has said as much.

After Vallas left Philadelphia, his wife and three of his four sons returned to their native Chicago. Vallas spends four or five days there each month, and he has coyly suggested he might run for governor of Illinois in 2010 -- he narrowly lost the Democratic nomination in 2002 to Gov. Ron Blagojevich.

Vallas openly admits to grooming his chief of staff to take over, saying two years are sufficient to get his reforms in place.

But in the end, Hess worries whether Vallas is fighting enough to avoid old regulations "growing back like kudzu" once he's gone.

If Vallas doesn't get results, Hess says, "that would either be taken as an indictment of the possibilities of urban schooling or of what's being perceived as aggressive reform."

A few early signs are encouraging: RSD students posted gains on state skills tests last May, and graduation rates jumped from 39% to 67%. But 80% of students are performing below grade level.

This fall's enrollment figures could provide needed good news about the renewal. Last year, about 86% of the region's pre-Katrina population returned, but school enrollment was only 76% of levels before the storm, suggesting that families are still waiting to be persuaded to move back.

Selling the plan to students

Perhaps Vallas' toughest sell will be to the students themselves.

One recent morning, he and Compass deliver what amounts to a tag-team commencement speech at the end of

a week-long Ninth Grade Nation program for new high schoolers. The students, distracted and wanting little more than to go home for the afternoon, listen as he offers a pep talk.

"These are all brand-new high schools," he says. "It's not the Reed of old, it's not the Douglass of old, it's not the John Mac (short for John McDonogh) of old. If you come to school every day and try real hard, we will not let you fail. You will succeed."

The students shift in their chairs. He is the sixth superintendent they have seen since their school careers began.

"Nobody fails," Vallas says. "Everybody succeeds! Are you with me on it?"

Silence.

It doesn't seem to discourage Vallas, who says many kids haven't been paying attention the past few months. "What we're trying to do is some really radical stuff here. So you have to be around to explain it."

CAPTION(S):

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